FLEX - PARK

'13 - '14 THESIS PROPOSAL

SAMUEL G. SANDERS

We as humans learn and experience the world through interacting with our environment and the delineation between aspects which we can and cannot manipulate. Within the architectural realm, our ability to readily manipulate and modify our environment is virtually nonexistent due to the social limitations that come with public design. Effectively, it separates the user from a sense of personalization, creativity, and self-inspired discovery. As we grow up we settle into this mindset and the idea of "don't touch" and "do not enter" become commonplace to the point that, instead of questioning or exploring our contexts, we simply accept that reality. Not only does this impair our full sense of place within the contexts and limit our sensual experience, but most damning of all is that it binds our imagination, thereby warping our sense of what reality is. This raises the question:

Can an unprescibed, fully flexible, and interactive public space be used to inspire communities to alter the way they engage the built enviornment

Can, by modifying the art of designing conventional spaces, we as architects begin to alter our status quos of the built environment within said spaces

Can changing these perceptions improve both the connectivity of the community as well as stimulate interactions between children and adults

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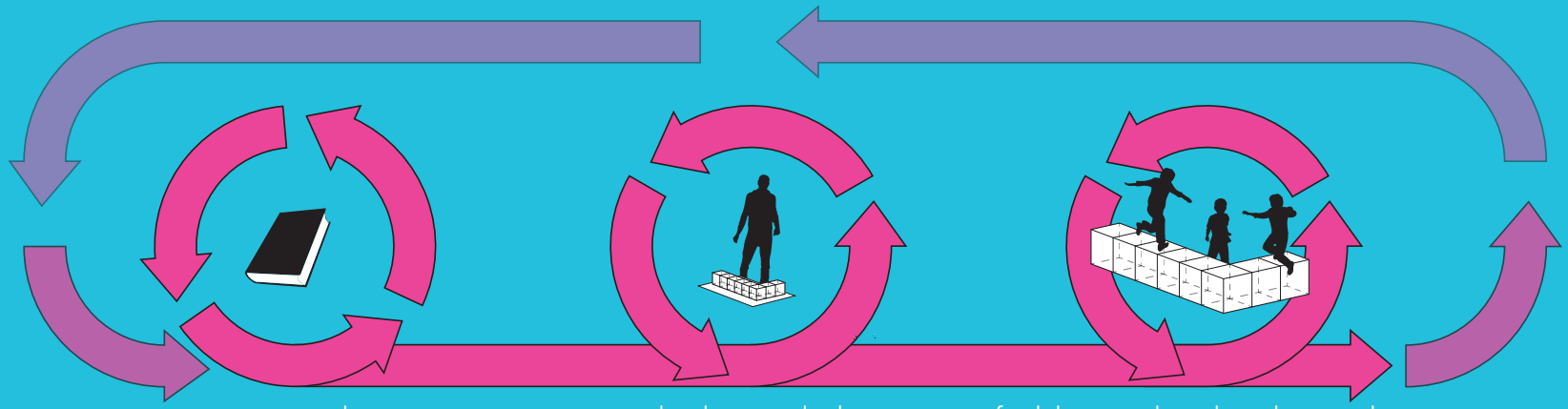


In order to efficiently and effectively assure that my solution is the optimal design solution, I have broken down the work process into three recycling, nonlinear phases: **Inquest, Iteration, and Influence + Implementation**. These three phases not only act as checks and balances towards one another, but they also stand to steer the design the development in a more rigorous direction.

JUST A PARK...

A FEW ACRES...

A DOZEN DESIGNS...

A WHOLE LOT OF FUN...

HUNDREDS OF PIECES...

INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

Imagine a place where you can create you adventure, a place where walls are there not to contain use but to inspire you, challenge you. Imagine a place where every day you come back to it's a new place, it never looks the same but it always feels familiar; a place where no matter how often you go, you always find something new and more exciting than the day before. Now imagine how a child paints that image, what do they see, what do they imagine? Do they see a far off distant planet, or a deep sea lab surrounded by unknown mystical creatures? One thing they most defiantly don't see is a rustic old rundown playground. So then a simple question arises, why do we as architects and designers continue to paint that image for them if that's not what they see? Why do limit they're imagination to static structures and fixed furnishings? But Sam, "a child's imagination is to vivid and wide spanning to design for?" Well, **FLEX - PARK** is not just a step, but the first great leap towards making their fantastic images a reality. It is an experiment is opening the door towards steering architecture, as a whole, **back to the road of the awe-inspiring wonder that was once just natural.**

The design process of the Flex - Park as a whole is much like a typical project design process. I.e., it implements the typical research, study models, and full scale models to direct the success of the concept. Yet, unlike most design processes that rely heavily on anticipated user reaction and responses and where a more detailed understanding of how people intimately react to individual moments in difficult to ultimate predict, the Thesis of the park will be able to explore those relationships in a real world setting. By building full scale mockups, not of the park as a whole, but unique connections and mobile elements, I can more readily garnish a stronger insight of how the user understands and embraces the connections between the parts. Also by doing these **"Mocks"** I can study connections that I had yet to consider which ultimate can help to drive more fluidity in later iterations. The driving factor of the Thesis is something that cannot be fully understood, expertly studied, or rationally qualified, but it is something that was once and still can be inherent to all of us: **the freedom of imagination.**

the prompt

the SITE

as is, flex - park will be based on a modular system inwhich in can ultimately be implemented to any any american public park and/or recreational area

flex - park mock I - frick park, pittsburgh, pa - exact location tbd

the TEAM

sam sanders	focus on details and the vast intricacies of design
art lubetz	focus on the psychological aspects of the senses on relation to space
hal hayes	focus on the experience and the theatricality of design
john folan	focus on code and regulations and application within the context of low income areas
dale clifford	focus on materiality and simplification of complex aspects of design

FLEX - PARK's ultimate mission is to help to build a stronger, healthier community of families, children, and educators through a focused importance of creativity, imagination, and play.

Inquest is the research phase of the design process. Within this I plan to focus on a number of the vast aspects of the site and context. One of the main focuses will be that of the landscape and greenery of the site and how might topography and landscaping of the site be manipulated to better foster unique experiences and moments that most modern parks and playgrounds shy away from. Another major focus will be on texture and material and how the sensual experience of touch changes through time. I'm planning to look at materials such as woods and metals whose tactility changes with age, thereby changing ones association with the material. To bring in a contrast of materials, I would also employ the use composite plastics, fiberglass materials, and rubber whose composition change much less over time. Through this I can explore how we relate the sense of touch and memory in our experiences. Another major aspect that the inquest stage will explore is the idea of modularity and actually designing for flexibility within the park program. This is mostly the largest and most experimental aspect of the research process as well as where a large portion of the design project hinges upon. Most parks and playground systems are pre-constructed structures with little to no liberty of flexibility.

Jungle gyms don't change their shape and monkey bars never move. I'm planning to challenge the conventionality and strict adherence to those unspoken ideas by breaking the traditional playground into divisible parts where the user can decide the orientation and arrangement of their park experience. Think of this like the Lego brick concept. Much like a Lego set, the parts are all designed and constructed, yet their arrangement and relationships are at the will of each user's imagination and personal desire. To get a better understanding of the real world physical limitations that are raise by this diversion I'm planning to meet with community recreation centers, schools, and child development centers throughout the greater Pittsburgh area. A number of local resources I've reached out to are the **University of Pittsburgh Child Development Center, Ammon Community Recreation Center, and John Heinz Family Center in partnership with the Jubilee Association**. By doing this I can better understand how parks and recreation currently weave into the urban fabric and test aspects that can allow for them to fit more cohesively. With these visitations that I hope can be arranged in a bi-tri-weekly fashion, I will bring prototypes and "Mocks" developed in the Iteration and Influence + Implement phases to test their practicalities.

Iteration is the mass prototyping phase of the design process. With this stage of develop I would take the information gathered in the Inquest phase and employ it in a workable scale to investigate design possibilities. This would be the more traditional phase of the process in terms of studio work. The core idea would be to build study models of various scales to understand the entirety of the site in respect of scale and context to the community and neighbors. You can look at this stage as testing a variety of shapes sizes and orders of the Lego bricks., ultimately assembling those bricks to see the possibilities and the unique opportunities the unfold. Through working on a smaller scale, I can easily produce a number of prototypes in a faster period of time in order for a greater rigor in establishing the optimal design set. As stated in the Inquest phase, I would meet with children as well as members within the community of focus to determine which characteristics are the most lucrative and work to further those traits. Once they've been developed they would move into the third stage, Influence + Implementation.

"Inspiring IMAGINATION and design through the ambiguity of choice."

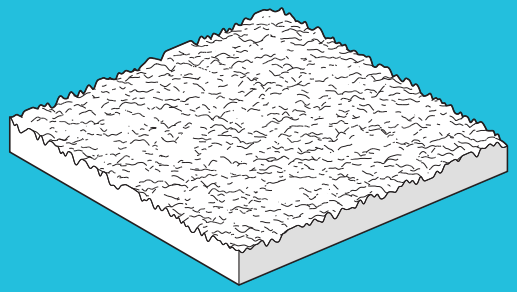
"Reality leaves a lot to the imagination."
— John Lennon

Influence + Implementation is the third phase of the design process. Within this stage the test models, "Mocks," are made into full scale mockups. This is the most difficult of the three, involving the most labor and manpower to ensure its ultimate success. Having taken the successful traits of the Iteration phase, I would be able to construct 1:1 scale mock ups of said pieces and test their relationships between one another. By doing this, I am able to see how the public interacts with the components and how successful they work together. This phase is the most experimental as a whole of all the three phases due to the fact that it is something that hinges upon the communities reception to something unconventional. Ideally, this phase works in tandem with the research phase, as mockups and relationships will be tested and modified based upon their results. This will help me get a better understanding of the data I compile in Inquest. Ultimately, looking optimistically, a full scale final build will be constructed that reflects the culmination of data, research, and trial and error assembled throughout the entire design process.

A major key component that I want to ensure that is respected and followed to the letter is the code and legislation in relation to public gathering places, pars, and recreations. I believe that this aspect, in particular can be used as a strongly influential design parameter rather than a constraint or limitation. For this I would have to contact the city as well as the county for a full spectrum of zoning codes, sizing requirements, height limitations, and safety regulations, amongst a slew of other rules. By compiling this data and applying it to the rigor of the Iteration phase, it helps to shape the project in a real world context as well as provide a safe and constructive flexible environment. Contradictory to what most modern communal spaces do and use code to butcher creative design, leaving the cheapest, least inspired result, I want to be able to maintain the freedom of unhinged creative design. By utilizing advisors whom have worked with in the constraints of the Pittsburgh building code system, I can more readily get an understanding of the differences in the more restrictive codes and the codes that have room for flexibility and exceptions.

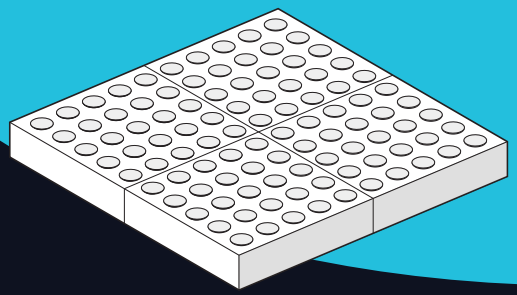
I have chosen the members of my advising teams with considerations to **specialties** as well as **experience** within the various elements of the subject and the site. A number of my first choices have experience with materiality and the change of materiality through time and how certain building elements can be view through a different scope than they conceptually are. Likewise, a number of the advisors have experience with constructing within the community and aiding to develop communities that don't always receive the same level of attention and consideration as others. This way the Flex – Park can fit within the community more harmoniously rather than being the sore thumb in the group. I believe that this team will be able to give me an insight that only years of experience and trial and error can reveal.

Bringing previous experiences to the table myself; I believe I can incorporate techniques that previous studios have given me. Fall 2011 – Environmental Center – Christine Brill: I plan to bring aspects of what I learned in terms of landscape manipulation and designing open "public" spaces. Spring 2012- Materials and Assembly (Team R) – Dale Clifford: With this particular project, I'm hoping to continue my investigation in constructible and deconstructible structures that occupy a public realm, while modifying those structures to be functional yet artist. Fall 2012 – Issues of Practice (Crossing Uptown) – John Folan: Within this project, I am planning to further develop aspects of designing with real world constraints in a low income community as well as improve and help grow overall community connectivity. Spring 2013 – Systems Integration (T1 – X) – Hal Hayes: Through this studio I plan to bring to the table how an architectural piece can become both an efficient and affective aspect of the contexts as well as an individual, independent, artistic statement. These coupled with experienced working at a number of architectural firms and working hand in hand with said firms in park and community center projects, I believe that I can successfully take Flex – Park from an inspiring Thesis Proposal idea, to the harbinger of countless memories and an **ever expanding imagination.**



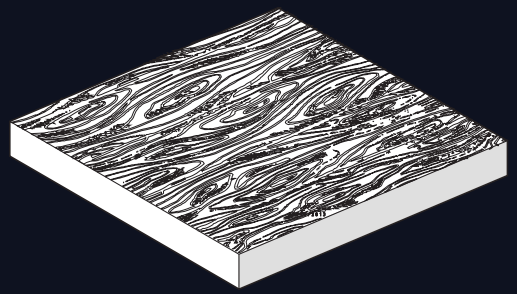
PLASTICS - High Density / Low Density Impact Resistant Reinforced Fiberglass + Recycled High Density Polyethylene

In order to assure safety and ease of flexibility in regards to moving parts, a number of the components that make up the park will have to be composed of a number of plastics. By using recycled milk jugs or, HDPE, the park can not only be environmentally conscience, but also, as time passes and components suffer from wear and tear, ultimately remodeled and replaced. This will ultimately insure the longevity of the park as an entirety. Texturally, the very distinct texture of the fiberglass will counter that of the finished woods.



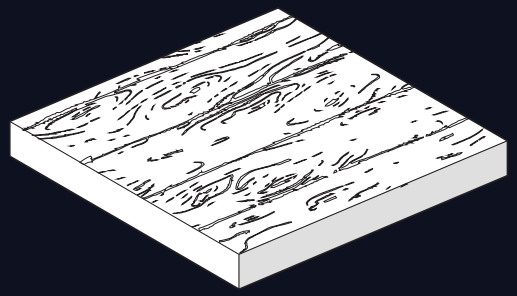
METALS - Treated and Acrylic Enamel Painted Aluminum

Like most playgrounds, the park with have both fixed and structural parts. To both reduce costs and improve longevity the best option for elements such as money bars, etc. is metal. Effectively speaking, by covering the metal in a coat of enamel paint, it not only prevents visible damage to the metal that can come with high user numbers, but it can also help to add color to the park.



ROUGH WOODS - Repurposed Aged Pine / Cedar Wood without Finish Coat

The aged wood can be recycled from various sources and would come at a much reduced cost from its treated counterpart. Yet, unlike the treated wood, the aged wood presents a greater risk of splintering and a severely decreased life span. For this reason, it would have to be used selectively, and with a higher consideration to children safety. The wood, on the positive, would bring a unique textural feel that most sterile playgrounds are void of.



FINISHED WOODS - Solid Cedar Wood with Mutli-Coat Polyurethane Finish

Fresh cedar gives off a warm and distinct scent that with finish coats is preserved. This will help to bring the sense of smell into the whole sensual experience of the park. Cedar has a strong reddish hue which will help to both contrast and compliment the greenery of Frick Park. With the introduction of wood, a more homely feel is given to the park, as well.

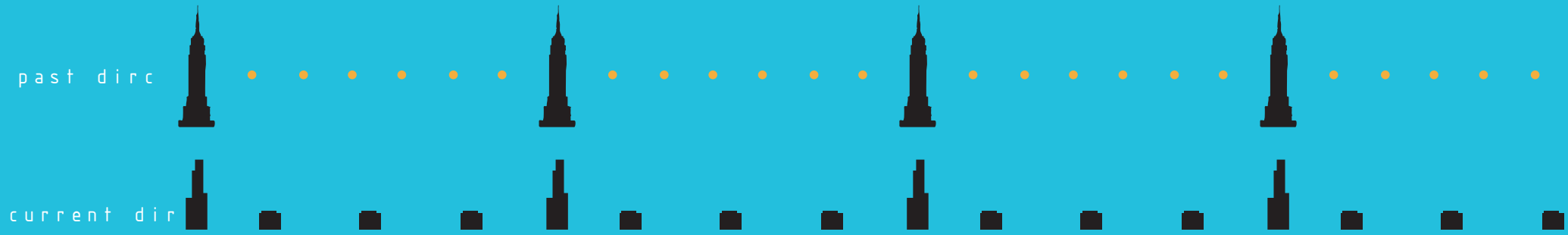
Imagination Playground
David Rockwell
Brooklyn, New York

The Blaxland Riverside
JMD Design
Sydney, Australia

KaBoom! Playground
Darell Hammond
various sites

Within the greater context of playgrounds, there are a number of playgrounds, much like FLEX - PARK, that stray from the common modern stagnate mentality of the park / recreation space. A few, much in the nature of Flex - Park, allow the user a sense of flexibility and freedom that they are typically restricted from. A playground that massively embraces this unique point of view would be David Rockwell's Imagination Playground. The concept of Imagination Playground is simple, "a mobile play system made up of big blue blocks in many unique shapes and sizes." Imagination Playground embraces the "Lego Brick" concept to a literal extent where in the user can literal form the specialized units into a number of interesting moments such as slides for balls and wheels to turn. Due to the fact that the play system is entirely independent and mobile, it lacks a strong connection and relationship to any give site in particular. The structures that can be constructed are limited by nature to surface level elements. Flex - Park, on the other hand, would consist of both stationary units with both fix and movable aspects, as well as completely moveable units. Yet, like Imagination Playground, Flex - Park would be composed of a wide range of various blocks that fit together in a vast number of unique arrangements.

Other distinguishable parks and recreation spaces utilize their various sites to either modify or infuse themselves in a given landscape. JMD Design's Blaxland Riverside Park in Sydney, Australia is a notable example. Within this unique park, that "pushes the limits of excitement," both parents and children are encouraged to participate and experience all the limits of the park. It is Sydney's largest playground and provides a diverse range of kids' activities and challenges for all ages and abilities. It's spread over 3 hectares, and incorporates water elements, moving play elements, high and steep landforms and hidden and confined spaces. Flex - Park is, ideally, slightly smaller of a structure than the entirety of the nearly 8 acre park. As where the Blaxland is a sprawling park of static immoveable architectural treatments, Flex - Park will have more user choice in location of a number of parts. Yet and still, on both scale and complexity of elements, the Blaxland Riverside Park is much in par with the concept of Flex - Park than Imagination Playground. All in all, both parts are heavily influenced and dependent on a strong contextual relationship and modify aspects of the terrain to enhance the overall experience.



My inspiration for the Flex - Park came in a few years ago. When I was a child there was a large playground on the outskirts of my neighborhood, in which, kids from miles, towns away would gather together to play at. This massive playground of hand crafted wood workmanship was a beautiful masterpiece of carpentry and innovation. It had places to hide, place to climb, and places to fall all working together to form priceless irreplaceable memories. Even in the winter, the park was never short of at least twenty kids. Unfortunately for children now, about two ago, the county deemed the park unsafe and costly to maintain. In response, the wooden playground was pulled down and replaced with a "safer" plastic park. With said new "improvement," the entire park lays barren and void of the laughter of the children whom had once filled it. This raised the question within me of, why do we sacrifice space that allows an opportunity to foster truly special memories for void and uninspired space that can be more easily applied? With these questions I started to question the very nature of the architectural field.

Within the field of architecture, just like in any creative aspect, as time changes, technologies advance, and social ideals grow, so does the product of labor. Personally speaking, at one point in architecture the fruit of our labors grow from much work, creative exploration, and innovation. With that being said, society would be blessed with a masterpiece of those works in which, just by the shear aspect of being a masterpiece, would inspire said society. Because of the limitations of the times, society would wait eras for another work, but when that next work finally arrived, it was as much, if not more, of a wonder and a masterpiece as its predecessor. Within the modern context, our ability to mass produce the same product has limited our desire to explore the finite intricacies of each individual project. We supplement amazing wonders for impressive displays and the time of anticipation between them for subpar and uninspired buildings. In other words, the value of the whole is now greater than that of its parts. Some would agree to this approach to architecture, but I personally believe it robs us of the phenomena of unique intimate moments, thereby limiting its ability to inspire us.

With this being said, Flex - Park will act as the starting point to return both architecture and society as a whole to the appreciation of **"the special moment."**

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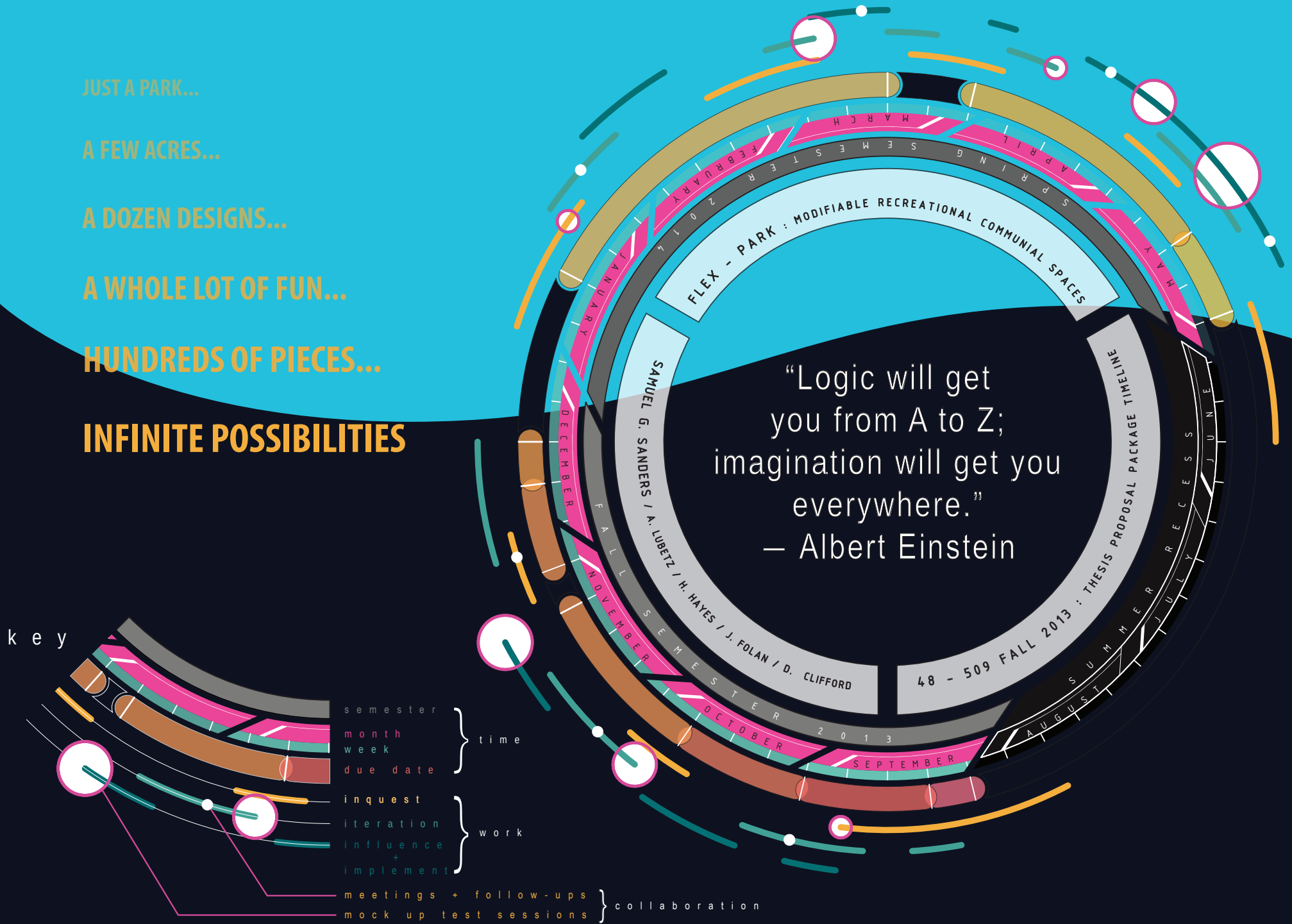

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contacts

University of Pittsburgh Child Development Center - University Child Development Center 635 Clyde Street Pittsburgh, PA 15260 / ucdc@hr.pitt.edu
Ammon Community Recreation Center - Hill District, 2217 Bedford Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 1522 / Shawn Schreckengost, Director
John Heinz Family Center in partnership with the Jubilee Association - Jubilee Association, Inc. 2005 Wyandotte St., Pittsburgh, PA 15213 / Jennifer Phillip, Center Director

THANK YOU

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION.